

Plunging Down The Rabbit Hole: Over The Years, Christian Nationalists Have Been Responsible For The Spread Of Some Rather Strange Ideas Apr 29, 2022

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Gatherings of the Lee County, Fla., school board are normally quiet affairs, but in August of 2021, one meeting got a little dicey. A woman who identified herself as a nurse took the podium during the public comment section, pointed at the board and said, "These are demonic entities, and we need to stick together. Remember, we have authority in Christ Jesus. These are demonic entities, and all school boards of all the United States of America - and all of us Christians will be sticking together to take them all out." She then began ranting about mask mandates in schools and attacked doctors, telling them to "go back to fucking medical school. ... Natural immunity is best. You are demonic entities. You're going to be taken down." The incident might have been easy to write off as an example of an angry parent, fueled by misinformation, going too far if it hadn't been repeated all over the country. Around the same time of that nurse's outburst, a spate of stories appeared in the media about people flipping their lids at meetings of school boards, city councils, county commissions and other units of local government. Many of the incidents were captured in grainy videos that now grace YouTube. Angry citizens attacked officials for taking steps to stop the spread of coronavirus. Others were worked up over the alleged presence of "critical race theory" in schools. Still others spouted nonsense straight from the fever swamps of QAnon, a bizarre conspiracy theory that holds that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping liberal elites enslaves children and drinks their blood. (Supposedly, Donald Trump was working to expose the nefarious scheme.) Some local officials protested that they didn't feel safe. They probably had good reason for that. Even a brief look at American history shows that some people who have consumed the potent cocktail of religious fundamentalism and political extremism are easily led to some pretty strange places. This article looks at some of the more unusual beliefs and conspiracy theories promoted by Christian nationalists since the founding of the republic. While not all are as over the top as QAnon, these misguided beliefs have had an impact. Fueled by a heady mix of fake news and fearmongering, Christian nationalists have sought to deny entire classes of citizens their rights and argued for a less free, more exclusionary country and sometimes sparked violence. Indeed, a "big lie" about an election that was in no way stolen led to the sacking of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. We begin with a look at a few of the mistaken ideas about our Constitution that surfaced shortly after the ink was dry on the 1787 document. Failure to merge Christianity with the government will lead to official atheism and/or America's destruction (Phase One) Not long after the U.S. Constitution was adopted, conservative ministers and others went on the warpath. The document, they griped, contained no references to God, Jesus Christ or the Christian faith and they were certain this would spark divine wrath. The attacks began shortly after ratification as copies of the Constitution were printed and people began reading it. In 1789, when President George Washington was touring New England, he received a message from a group of clergy in the area who told him, "We should not have been alone in rejoicing to have some explicit acknowledgement of THE TRUE ONLY GOD, AND JESUS CHRIST who he has sent, inserted somewhere in the Magna Carta of our country." The failure to declare America officially Christian, was "an omission which no pretext whatever can palliate," thundered New York pastor John M. Mason in a 1793 sermon. Mason predicted that God would soon take his vengeance and "overturn from its foundations the fabric we have been rearing, and crush us to atoms in the wreck." In Boston, an anonymous writer tore into language at the end of Article VI of the Constitution, which bans religious tests for public office. Its effect, he carped, was that "all religion is expressly rejected, from the Constitution," which led him to ask, "Was there ever any State or kingdom, that could subsist, without adopting some system of religion?" A writer in a Virginia newspaper made a similar point, arguing that all governments "have found it necessary to call in the aid of religion," while Presbyterian minister William Linn posed this question about decoupling church and state: "Would this not be a nation of Atheists?" When Thomas Jefferson sought the presidency in 1800, the Christian nationalist clergy of the day went into overdrive. Jefferson's deistic religious views were anathema to this crew, which accused him (incorrectly) of atheism. One Federalist newspaper famously declared, "Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the seal of death is that moment set in our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of Goddess of Reason, will preside in the Sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of Most High." Jefferson served eight years. No prostitutes were instilled in churches. Failure to merge Christianity with the government will lead to official atheism and/or America's destruction (Phase Two) After a brief intermission, claims by conservative ministers that the Constitution was some sort of plot to create an atheist America resurfaced as the Second Great Awakening took hold in the 19th century. In 1811, the Rev. Samuel Austin, a congregationalist minister in Massachusetts who later served as president of the University of Vermont, moaned that the Constitution "is entirely disconnected from Christianity." He called this a "capital defect" and said it would lead "inevitably to its destruction." The attacks on America's secular constitution kept on coming, right into the antebellum era. In 1845, the Rev. David X. Jenkin, a Presbyterian from Pennsylvania, charged that the Constitution "is negatively atheistically, for no God is appealed to at all. In framing many of our public formularies, greater care seems to have been taken to adapt them to the prejudices of the INFIDEL FEW, than to the consciences of the Christian millions." Interestingly, this view was circulating even as a quite different perspective began to emerge during the same period. In the 1840s and '50s, several revisionist writers published books arguing that deistic Founders like Washington and Jefferson were devout Christians, and the Constitution was designed to perpetuate a Christian order despite a complete lack of language to that effect in the document. But this view took time to catch on in Christian nationalist circles. During the Civil War, the more common perspective was for conservative ministers to acknowledge and assail - America's secular founding. Some latched onto a novel way to solve the problem: foster a form of national civil religion. In November of 1861, with the war raging, the Rev. M. R. Watkinson of Ridley Ville, Pa., wrote to Salmon P. Chase, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, to suggest adding God to the nation's coinage. "What if our Republic were not shattered beyond reconstruction?" asked Watkinson. "Would not the antiquaries of succeeding centuries rightly reason from our past that we were a heathen nation?" Watkinson, stating that he had "felt our national shame in disowning God as not the least of our present national disasters," suggested adding the phrase "GOD, LIBERTY, LAW" to all U.S. coins, an action, he said, that "would relieve us from the ignominy of heathenism. This would place us openly under the Divine protection we have personally claimed." Chase liked the idea, but during discussions over the matter with Treasury Department staff, he altered the slogan to "In God We Trust." Congress approved the change, and the phrase soon began appearing on coinage, although it was not officially codified for use on all currency until the 1950s. Without a 'Christian nation' amendment to the Constitution, we're doomed Monkeying with the money was just a start. During the waning years of the Civil War, ministers from 11 Protestant denominations in the North banded together in a proto-Christian-nationalist group called the National Reform Association (NRA) to push for the addition of a so-called "Christian nation" amendment to the Constitution. The NRA's goal was to "secure such an amendment to the Constitution of the United States as will declare the nation's allegiance to Jesus Christ and its acceptance of the moral laws of the Christian religion, and so indicate that this is a Christian nation." Some NRA supporters believed that the Civil War was a form of divine punishment for slighting God with a secular Constitution. During an NRA meeting held in Xenia, Ohio, in 1863, an attorney named John Alexander delivered a formal paper, telling attendees, "We regard the neglect of God and His law, by omitting all acknowledgment of them in our Constitution, as the crowning, original sin of the nation, and slavery as one of its natural outgrowths. Therefore, the most important step remains to yet to be taken to amend the Constitution so as to acknowledge God and the authority of His law." At the end of the war the nation had more pressing matters to tend to, and the NRA's proposal languished. But eventually the idea found some champions in Congress, and a version of it was introduced. The House Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the amendment in 1874, but members of the Committee were not impressed and voted it down. In a message, committee members cited "the dangers which the union between church and state had imposed upon so many nations of the Old World." The proposal resurfaced in 1882, but then faded away. Remarkably, updated versions of the "Christian nation" amendment were introduced in Congress in 1961, 1963 and 1965, but these failed to gain serious traction. The spirit and style of these early efforts a farrago of outrageous claims, bad history, fundamentalist preachifying, gaslighting, etc. were resurrected by Christian nationalist groups in the modern era. Which leads us to: Feminism will destroy American society The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution, which would ban discrimination on account of sex, was first proposed by women's rights activists in the 1920s. But it didn't gather serious steam until the 1970s. The U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate approved the measure, and it went out to the states for ratification. 38 states needed to approve the amendment for it to become part of the Constitution. Thirty had done so by the end of 1973. Then along came a woman named Phyllis Schlafly. A Cold-War-era Republican and conservative Catholic advocate of "traditional values," Schlafly argued that the ERA would erode the family, "the basic unit of society, which is ingrained in the laws and customs of our Judeo-Christian civilization." She also asserted that under the ERA, women would lose access to the "Christian tradition of chivalry." Some of the claims of the anti-ERA campaigners were fantastic. They asserted that laws that protect women against sexual assault or that enable them to receive alimony or child support would be swept away. Women were told their daughters would be subject to the military draft. Some amendment opponents even asserted that all public bathrooms would have to become unisex. Schlafly's anti-ERA drive was anchored in conservative houses of worship. She built bridges to evangelical churches, reached out to Mormons and won support from other conservative denominations; she had many Christian nationalists in the resurgent Religious Right on her side. In 1982, the ERA,

having failed to gain passage in 38 states within a 7-year ratification time limit, was considered dead. Christian nationalists still use the issue of "radical feminism" today to motivate followers, win votes for their favored candidates and raise money. In a 1992 fundraising letter, TV preacher and right-wing political activist Pat Robertson penned a passage that has become infamous. "The feminist agenda," Robertson wrote, "is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians." Gays are coming for your children. The burgeoning gay-rights movement of the 1970s sparked an immediate backlash led by Christian nationalists - and conspiracy theories were their favorite weapon. In 1977, Anita Bryant, a former beauty pageant winner, pop singer and pitch-woman for Florida orange juice, led a crusade to repeal a Dade County ordinance that banned discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. Bryant, a fundamentalist Christian who later founded a ministry, often campaigned alongside TV preacher Jerry Falwell. At one rally she remarked, "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children." Such "recruitment" lines became stock and trade in Christian nationalist anti-LGBTQ efforts. Bryant's campaign in Dade County was successful, and she later led a drive to ban gays from adopting in Florida, but some of her later initiatives failed. She promoted a ballot question in California in 1978 that would have banned LGBTQ people and anyone who advocated for LGBTQ rights from working in the state's public schools. These early battles established a playbook that Christian nationalists still use today to attack LGBTQ people: outrageous claims with no evidence, backed by calls to "protect the children." Christian nationalists have penned so many anti-LGBTQ screeds it would be impossible to list them all. In this sea of hate, a few stand out as especially pernicious and conspiracy-theory-laden. The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party argues that, you guessed it, the Nazis were gay. The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today by Alan Sears, former head of Alliance Defending Freedom, a large Christian nationalist legal group, argues that the cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants is probably gay because his best friend is a pink starfish. (Remember, it was Falwell, the late Moral Majority founder, who first warned the nation about Tinky Winky, the allegedly gay Teletubby.) When the Supreme Court extended marriage equality to the entire nation in 2015, Christian nationalist groups claimed American society would never survive. Houses of worship, they claimed, would be forced to perform same-sex marriage. (Didn't happen.) The country would rebel. (Most people support the ruling.) The nation would implode. (We're still standing.) Anti-LGBTQ bills remain a constant in the Christian nationalist political playbook. Florida, legislation has been passed that bars teachers and in school staff from even discussing gender issues in lower grades. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott has ordered state officials to investigate parents who provide transgender-affirming care for their children. Several other states have passed or are considering anti-LGBTQ legislation. Secular Humanists secretly run the world In the 1970s and 1980s, Religious Right groups loved to blame a nefarious force they called "secular humanism" for every imaginable ill. According to their wide-ranging conspiracy theory, secular humanists of society government, education, media had infiltrated every segment and entertainment and were hard at work driving all vestiges of religion from public life. a fundamentalist preacher and author who became famous Tim LaHaye, (and wealthy) for this series of apocalyptic potboilers called "Left Behind," was a major proponent of the "secular-humanists-are-taking-over" line. Long before he cashed in on fiction, LaHaye penned a series of non-fiction books promoting "Christian nation" themes and warning darkly about the secular humanist plot to turn America's children into God-hating Marxists. LaHaye's 1980 tome, The Battle for the Mind, was described by its publisher as the book that "awakened America to the stranglehold of secular humanism upon our culture." LaHaye followed that up with 1982's The Battle for the Family, which "identified humanism's threat to the home." In 1983, he wrote The Battle for the Public Schools: Humanism's Threat to Our Children, which dedicates nearly 300 pages to uncovering the humanists' schemes to use public schools to crush Christianity. To drive the point home, an illustration shows a tree with a trunk labeled "SECULAR HUMANISM." Other words on the trunk include "Atheism," "Evolution," "Socialism" and "Rationalism," and from it spring branches and leaves that read "Public Schools," "Liberal Social Workers," "Welfarism," "Homosexuality," "Abortion," "Bureaucracy" and others. LaHaye had allies helping him whip up the secular-humanist hysteria. Televangelist Robertson was prone to use secular humanism as an all-purpose bogeyman. He started way back in 1981, when Robertson asserted on his "700 Club" program that "public schools are actually agencies for the promotion religion." He continued the drumbeat for years. In of another religion, which is the humanist his 1994 book Most Probing Questions, Robertson carped, the schools through such methods Answers To 200 of Life's "Humanist values are being taught in these things constitute an attempt to wean children as 'values clarification. All of away from biblical Christianity." On occasion, Robertson employed surrogates to spread the message. During a meeting of Robertson's Christian Coalition in 1995, failed Supreme Court candidate Robert Bork asserted that the court had imposed a supposed "religion" of secular humanism on the country. Secular humanism, by the way, exist. It's a non-theistic philosophy that looks to human reason, not deities, to solve problems. Groups promote it around the world, including the U.S., but it has never become a mass movement. And speaking of Pat Robertson... Who really runs the world? Pat's New World Order One of the strangest - and most offensive conspiracy theories sprang from the mind of Robertson and was outlined in World Order. Long before QAnon disguised antisemitism, Robertson posited the strings of fingered a panoply his 1991 book The New and with what sounds like thinly the existence of a sinister cabal of elites who pulled world finance. Robertson of usual suspects of conspiracy theory literature: the Trilateral Commission, the Federal the mother of all conspiracy theories; Robertson labeled them "The Establishment." to Robertson, The Establishment has been running world of years. They engineered the assassination of Freemasons, the Illuminati, Reserve and "European bankers." Together, they formed According affairs for hundreds President Abraham Lincoln, bankrolled the Reds in tsarist Russia, promoted 2 world wars and arranged for the creation of the Federal Reserve and Revenue Service. The book was quickly denounced as a collection of classic conspiracy-theory views. Writer Joe Quena reviewed The New World Order for The Wall Street Journal and called it "a predictable compendium of the lunatic fringe's greatest hits" written in "energetically crackpot style." But other reviewers uncovered more disturbing themes. In The New York Review of Michael Lind noted that the book relied on a host of antisemitic Lind and another writer, Jacob Heilbrunn, pointed out, almost word for word from English writer Nesta H. Webster, whose books were openly antisemitic. Robertson was briefly put on the defensive over the book, but even so, in the end he made money on its publication: The New World Order briefly topped The New York Times list of bestsellers. Democratic presidents are murderers and secret Muslims The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 put some the edge. 2 years after Clinton's election, Falwell video he had helped fund called "The Clinton Chronicles" Clinton of engineering the murders and of political enemies cocaine addict. No proof was offered for those charges. Appears in silhouette to be at one point in the video, a man an investigative reporter his life. Who had looked into Clinton's affairs and was now in fear of The man turned a right-wing activist who ran out to be Pat Amatriciana, an anti-Clinton organization. He was not a reporter, and didn't fear hadn't seriously investigated Clinton for his life. Amatriciana later admitted that the cloak-and-dagger stuff was Falwell's idea, saying Falwell "thought it would be dramatic." In 2008, Barack Obama won the White House, and Christian nationalists again could not deal with that. Before the election, whispering campaign with Donald they started a prominent promulgator, was really a Muslim who hadn't as now known as "birtherism." That Obama been born in America. Obama, a member of the United Church of Christ who was born in Hawaii, Produced his birth certificate, which members right promptly claimed was fake. of the far Religious Right groups that fancy themselves as "mainstream" attempted to keep the tinfoil "birther" conspiracists at arm's length, but they didn't always succeed. During the 2010 Values Voter Summit Sponsored by the Family Research Council, A speaker named Dale Peterson ridiculed the "little feet" on Obama's birth certificate, adding, "I don't know what he is." After openly derided the idea that In a media interview the speech, Peterson Obama was born in America. The Big Lie, QAnon and vaccines are now - a nation awash in conspiracy by Christian nationalists. In 2021, insurrection We've come to where we theories, many created and championed their world, Trump won in 2020 and the Jan. 6, was led by Antifa. don't work and/or contain microchips. Democrat-backed pedophiles run sex-trafficking rings out of a Washington, D.C., while also engineering world affairs. Some conspiracy spawned splinter conspiracy theories. Members of a dissident Faction months hanging around Dealey Plaza in Dallas, of President John F. Kennedy's Assassination on November 22, 1963, last year where they awaited the arrival of John F. Kennedy Jr., who died in a plane crash in 1999 Going vice president office. was nonetheless supposedly to become Trump's once the former reality TV host regained That may sound fantastic - and it is. But, according to polls, somewhere 15% of Americans believe the tenets of QAnon. Even at end, that's more than 13 million people. here have had followers, many to be believed, or between 4% And the low All the weird claims we've surveyed attracting large numbers. They don't have to be true to have an effect on our political system our lives. Nor does their strange, demonstrably false Remember, as a statement apparently never uttered by up!) is covering it the world before the truth can get goes, "A lie can travel halfway its boots on." The Latest The Litigation Internal Books, writer sources. Does Some were really Vaccines Satanic pizza restaurant theories have QAnon the site passages, lifted often him Trump nature around spent and Press Christian nationalists over began hawking a that accused being a and hinder their spread. attributed to Mark Twain but (unless someone claims but who [Plunging Down The Rabbit Hole: Over The Years, Christian Nationalists Have Been Responsible For The Spread Of Some Rather](#)